

Nonviolence Training in Prison

The Long Days and Nights

by Diane Leonetti

Green Haven Correctional Facility is a maximum security prison near Stormville, New York, which houses 1700 felony offenders. The electric chair is there now, in a remote section of the prison where two men presently live out the hours on Death Row while the courts determine whether or not they will finish their lives there.

On a cold Sunday in December, three of us drove up to Green Haven for a little-noticed but important ceremony: the awarding of certificates to seven inmates who have completed intensive training in nonviolence and are now equipped to train other inmates. With me were Janet Charles, Fellowship photographer, and Lee Stern, one of the trainers and a mainstay of the Quaker program in conflict resolution that has brought nonviolence training into New York prisons. We drove through the silent, snowy, rural countryside to the long, stone building that forms the front of the vast, square fortress that is Green Haven. Inside the square, with four gun turrets on each side, are other buildings and prison yards.

In the main reception hall, one gets the first taste of what it's like to visit someone in prison. Upon stepping inside, the visitor immediately comes under the system, permeated by suspicion and moving at a snail's pace, that runs the institution. We joined a line of nearly one hundred people that snaked around the room and back to the entrance door, through which visitors continued to arrive. In twenty minutes, the line barely moved. A woman in line cradled in her arms a large box filled with cookies, potato chips and cooked food in plastic containers. Children held gifts in paper bags. "I'll carry the cigarettes," a little boy told his mother.

Eventually, we discovered that we were in the wrong line and were expected to enter at the side gate. We went out to the car and *drove* around to the side; that's how big the place is. There we moved slowly through a small, unheated shed where three men in uniform stood behind a counter. The first man found our names on a list of approved visitors. The second man searched our bags, put items not allowed

inside the prison into brown envelopes, each marked with a number, and gave us a card to sign with a corresponding number. He took away lipsticks on the ground that prisoners who had cosmetics could dress up as women and escape. The third man in line stamped the backs of our hands. Outside the shed, we gathered in front of a metal door in the prison wall and stood in the cold until the man looking down from the gun turret gave the signal to roll up the door. Once inside the wall, we passed through an electronic metal-detector and moved on to stand before a metal fence, facing the prison yard. When that gate opened for us, Janet and I climbed into a waiting van and drove off with a grey-haired inmate at the wheel.

The driver was pleasant, but he didn't tell us where we were going as we drove through the deserted yard until, finally, I asked. "J block," was the answer. When we arrived, he jumped out and opened the door for us with a smile and a joke. Inside J block, we were led by a guard to a large, L-shaped room filled with inmates and visitors at long folding tables. No one we knew was there. We found some empty seats and asked the two men at the table if we could sit there. They said we could. They were inmates who were not in the nonviolence program but had been invited to attend by inmates who were. One of the men went to get some of the catered food—chicken, potato and cole slaw—provided by the Quakers, who conduct regular religious services inside Green Haven.

Sitting in that room, the thought persisted that Green Haven is not a place where one would expect a nonviolence training program to get off the ground, let alone flourish as it has. In recent months, I had been told, two inmates had been murdered by fellow prisoners. Violence prevails in maximum security prisons. Most inmates are forced to live by the rule that the only way to avoid becoming a victim of violence is to make it clear that you are prepared to retaliate in kind. In this tense and brutal atmosphere, it can be an act of daring for an inmate to sign up for nonviolence training. He is virtually making a public declaration that he thinks it